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Author(s): DUNCAN McCOLL CHESNEY

Source: *Criticism*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 2007), pp. 307-325

Published by: Wayne State University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23130899>

Accessed: 10-07-2018 15:19 UTC

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D U N C A N M C C O L L C H E S N E Y

Toward an Ethics of Silence: Michael K

IN THIS PAPER, by a focus on the representation of Michael K as a figure of silence in *Life & Times of Michael K*, I attempt to draw out J. M. Coetzee's assertion of a fundamental ethico-political aporia. This aporia, which derives in contemporary theory from Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot's separate work on Emmanuel Levinas and expresses the constitutive gap between any given politics and individual ethical responsibility, is developed in somewhat different terms by Giorgio Agamben, upon whose reading of Herman Melville's character Bartleby I model my understanding of Michael K. The account of Bartleby as a figure of potentiality offered by Agamben provides both an intriguing explanation of Michael K's curious irrecoverability as well as a possible pro-spective (utopian), *euporic* resolution of the antinomy that K embodies in a thinking of a "coming community." Through this reading I seek to address a misunderstanding I find in much criticism of Coetzee's novel regarding its "political" shortcomings. I then conclude with a suggestion about what *Life & Times of Michael K*, and Coetzee's work in general, teaches or reminds us about literature.

The peculiarity of Herman Melville's great, enigmatic creation Bartleby derives from his unique lack of engagement—a lack that is in no way simply a refusal—exemplified by his formula "I would prefer not to."¹ Much has been written about Bartleby, and Giorgio Agamben's conception of him as a figure of contingency, of potentiality maintained in radical passivity,² is perhaps the most suggestive and pregnant for a thinking of the relation of the ethical to the political. By putting action in suspension through a maintenance of potentiality, "I would prefer not to" as the "*restitutio in integrum* of possibility, which keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and nonoccurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity not to be," necessarily draws attention to socially expected forms of understanding, behavior, and response.³ This leads the Wall Street lawyer, Bartleby's employer, to a critical self-evaluation, almost to a breakdown, though in the end he seems incapable of really

Criticism, Summer 2007, Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 307–325

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understanding Bartleby's lesson. Bartleby's final words to the lawyer as he wastes away in prison, "I know where I am" (Melville 669), certainly sound like an admonition, if not an outright condemnation of the lawyer's ethical failure.

Bartleby's minimal formula should be understood as a form of silence. But the quiet of the "silent man," as Bartleby's fellow inmates dub him (670), cannot simply be understood as reticence. It is an indeterminate suspension of response that has the metalinguistic consequence of drawing attention to the discourse and to its practical as well as ethico-political presuppositions, one might say a (mute) "speech act" of passivity, whose illocutionary effect is a radical suspension of the conditions of response. Within Agamben's broader concerns, this potentiality does not simply indicate the social placement of any given discourse, but relates to the human condition of language itself. In the preface to the French translation of his 1978 *Infanzia e storia*, Agamben delineates the contents of an unwritten book on the human voice and describes a fundamental *experimentum linguae*, an experience of language itself, of the *thing* of language (an experiment prepared by the Saussurean revolution in linguistics, as refined by Émile Benveniste and in a different way Roman Jakobson, and its reverberations in poststructuralist thought of the period, but an experiment also always implicit in the experience of poetry, broadly defined). There is no fundamental human voice, Agamben suggests, that is subsequently articulated by the letter, by grammar, into human speech. Voice—the mute, meaningful precondition of language assumed by the metaphysical tradition, by Martin Heidegger as well as G. W. F. Hegel—is an illusion (explored in the 1982 *Language and Death*). There is no ineffable silence or meaningful voice before language, merely the presuppositional fact of language as such (always entered, as Claude Lévi-Strauss argued, as a synchronic totality), which is experienced in the *experimentum*, through shifters, through rhetoric, through that which draws attention to the artificiality, conventionality, and nonreferentiality of language as a system.

[T]here is no *arthros*, no articulation between *phone* and *logos* . . . The space between voice and *logos* is an empty space, a limit in the Kantian sense. Only because man finds himself cast into language without the vehicle of a voice, and only because the *experimentum linguae* lures him, grammarless, into that void and that *aphonia*, do an *ethos* and a community of any kind become possible.⁴

So our very being, as animals without voice, cast into language, has radical implications for ethics and politics.

Bartleby's silence is another invitation to this experiment. And it is very disruptive, as it shuts down the regular, smooth functioning of social speech. But as indeterminate, as silent, how can such a gesture have political or ethical significance? Žižek, criticizing Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's discussion of Bartleby in *Empire* writes: "[I]n its political mode, Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' is *not* the starting point of 'abstract negation' which should then be overcome

in the patient positive work of the 'determinate negation' of the existing social universe, but a kind of *arche*, the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement: far from 'overcoming' it, the subsequent work of construction, rather, gives body to it."⁵ The *arch-aic* question posed by Bartleby's suspension of convention is the very question of community.

J. M. Coetzee, through Bartleby's avatar Michael K, reprises Melville's famous ethical problematic in a minimally futuristic extrapolation from apartheid South Africa at one of its crisis points in the 1980s in his novel *Life & Times of Michael K*.⁶ By now, with Coetzee's canonization confirmed by the 2003 Nobel Prize for literature, the novel has become quite famous (originally winning the Booker Prize in 1983), although primarily within the narrow confines of Anglophone postcolonial literary criticism. However, the novel's resistance to that discipline's immediate concerns, like its initial ambivalent reception in a politically charged South Africa, can perhaps be understood by a new focus, an attentiveness to the silence and the ethical challenge of Michael K.

In an early review of the book, while admitting an "allegorical dimension" of the novel and praising its able posing of difficult questions in the contemporary political environment, Nadine Gordimer laments "a revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions," noting that Coetzee "does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves."⁷ She goes on to identify this as a failure to live up to a specifically Lukácsian notion of what literature should be.⁸ It is by now quite clear that Coetzee's novelistic vision has little to do with Lukács (or indeed any Marxist or Marxian aesthetic),⁹ and that his contribution to the debate—on the political situation of apartheid, on the role of the writer in society, on the political and ethical dimensions of art—realized (is realizing) its considerable influence in different terms.

Subsequent criticism continued to miss much of the subtlety of Coetzee's novel. For example, in one of the early monographs on Coetzee, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*,¹⁰ Dick Penner writes competently of Coetzee's relation to Franz Kafka as well as to the literary tradition of the *Plaasroman* and of John Steinbeck and the agrarian-protest novel, praising the novel among other reasons for "revealing the awakening consciousness of a primitive mind" (94). He concludes that the book is "an almost unqualified artistic success . . . an unforgettable portrait of war-torn South Africa and Michael's evolving consciousness and sense of being" (111). The qualification—Penner's main criticism of the novel—is the second section, the medical officer's narrative, "an aesthetic choice that did not work as well as it might have . . . a consequence of Coetzee's feeling a necessity to include a point of view other than Michael K's" (110). On the contrary, I think a shift in focus on the novel can show this section to form an integral (and effectively realized) role in the overall narrative.¹¹

In a different vein (though one essentially more akin to Gordimer), Benita Parry suggests in a later and influential article that Coetzee's novels "circumvent, or rather confirm, that quandary of white writing's insecurity or dislocation in South Africa" (150), and that his "narrative strategies both enact a critique of dominant discourses and pre-empt dialogue with non-canonical knowledges through representing these as ineffable," (158) a charge I will address below.¹² More sophisticated readings have since emerged—most notably among the monographs, studies by David Attwell, Dominic Head, Sue Kossew, and Derek Attridge, and, admittedly, Coetzee's subsequent publications have made certain aspects of his earlier fiction stand out more.¹³ But generally something seems to be missing in the critical assessment of this key book in Coetzee's oeuvre.

Michael K's silence has various obvious and metaphorical explanations: for example, his harelip, and his feelings of humiliation and intimidation (which combined lead to his perception by his interlocutors as "simple"); his status as son of silence, or a prohibition on speech, in the rules of the Huis Norenus, the state boarding school to which he is entrusted/abandoned by his mother (104–05); his marginalization (as nonwhite, proletarian), thus as one who has no "voice" in society. We can explain K's silence. How do we understand it?

K's reticence in the novel is not just that of shame and intimidation. His silence is more profound and passes a harsher judgment on his "times." In numerous places K is likened in his behavior to an animal—indeed, in his own self-perception at the end of the novel, to a mole: "I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence" (182). His experience on the mountain and the farm reduces him to sheer body, outside of human commerce and time, but if K is a figure of barely human existence, it is not in some mystical, presocial connection to the earth or in any equally mystical transcendence. He is, rather, an example of Giorgio Agamben's *nuda vita*, and "bare life is the product of the [biopolitical] machine and not something that preexists it, just as law has no court in nature or in the divine mind."¹⁴ K's peculiar existence is precisely produced by the society that has no place for him. The concept of bare life marks Agamben's exploration of Michel Foucault's analysis of modern biopower along with contemporary political thought about sovereignty deriving from Walter Benjamin's critique of Carl Schmitt—in essence, that the "state of exception" has become the norm. The emblem of this critical work by Agamben is *homo sacer*, a being abandoned—through concentration (camps) or marginalization—by the law, which in turn has become a force without content. K should be a token of this inclusive exclusion, but he persistently slips through boundary and definition.

During his second stay at the farm in the Karoo, K muses: "What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast" (99). The times force K into bestiality, and the beast, of course, has no language, no articulate voice. K

reveals, in a somewhat different way, the indistinctness of the limit between human and nonhuman that is exemplified for Agamben in the “undignified,” destroyed *Muselmann*, another figure of silence, as of bare life.¹⁵ As this figure makes clear in Agamben’s work, bare life is *not* simply *zoē* as opposed to *bios*, some sheer natural substrate underneath forms of social and communal life. Rather, it is a politicized form of natural life, life exposed to sovereign violence. K, in his silence, is then “witness” to the inhumanity of the society of camps and systematic violence. This brutalization leads to an understandable reticence: what can you say in the face of systematic and dehumanizing violence, injustice, and absurdity? For example, when K is first at Jakkalsdrif and is considering escape, a fellow intern chastises him, explaining that the camp is not a prison but a social service provided by the state for those without work, housing, and food. “Why should people with nowhere to go run away from the nice life we’ve got here . . . Where do you come from that you do not know these things?” he asks K, who, surrounded by fences and men with guns, forcibly removed from his relative freedom in a society that in any case has already fallen apart, and confined to a communal dorm with the “opportunity” for work that if eschewed can only lead to starvation, does not know what to answer. “K was silent. He did not understand who was being blamed” (78). What could K respond?¹⁶

One answer is that K could respond in the “speech” of political action, and this brings us back to the initial critical response to the novel.¹⁷ One obvious, if literally “extra-diegetic,” explanation of K’s passivity and silence is provided by Coetzee in an interview with David Attwell: “The book about going off with the guerrillas, the book in the heroic tradition, is not a book I *wanted-to-write*, wanted enough to be able to bring off.”¹⁸ This is simply not what the book aims to represent. But we do not need to refer to interviews to find an answer to the question of the political in *Michael K*, because different alternatives are presented and thematized within the text itself. The main example of political consciousness within the novel, since we are never given any clear representation of the guerrillas or the resistance, is in the figure of Robert, a fellow intern at Jakkalsdrif. Robert is a family man who worked as a laborer on a sheep farm for twelve years but was “let go” by his boss without warning or compensation to be replaced by a younger, cheaper, single man, and then picked up as an unemployed vagrant on the very road out of the farm. He is well aware that the camps exist not as social services of a welfare state but as services for the landowners, providing cheap, short-term “contract” labor rather than long-term jobs with the benefits that make a decent life possible. He acts as a would-be educator of K in political matters, commenting that the society needs and indeed wants the camps to exist, but requires that they be out of sight for the sake of seamliness and good conscience. To K’s reluctance to understand and admit to this state of affairs, Robert responds, “You’re a baby. You’ve been asleep all your life. It is time to wake up” (88). What Robert says does seem quite reasonable, and the reader is left wondering why K

cannot heed the “call” of political consciousness (as certain critics wondered of Coetzee in the 1970s and ‘80s).

We learn still more about K during this episode. He ponders Robert’s words: “He no longer found it strange to think of the camp as a place where people were deposited to be forgotten. It no longer seemed an accident that the camp lay out of sight of the town on a road that led nowhere else” (94). Perhaps Robert’s Agambenian sense that the camp (and the state of exception that it embodies) has become the norm—“the camp was . . . a privileged site where meaning erupted into the world” (165)—is pushing K to an epiphany, to a revolutionary political consciousness. But the insight remains undigested (95). Tellingly, K “could not yet believe that the two young men on the guardhouse porch would sit and watch with equanimity, yawning, smoking . . . while people were dying before their eyes” (94). K cannot think beyond the individuals he has contact with to a level of abstraction necessary for political consciousness. Yet K even imagines a scenario in which all of the inmates dig a vast mass grave and simply lie in it as all of the evidence of the internment and extermination is piled on top of them and everything forever put out of sight and memory. Is K’s resistance to abstraction, despite a repressed, fantastical knowledge of the “truth,” simply a surface naïveté, an inability to imagine “Hitler’s willing executioners” and the larger script directing their actions? K appears to think only in terms of individuals and situations. His “simplicity” consists partly in his unskillfulness at abstractions and principles. Earlier, when the good Samaritan has expressed his practical philosophy of helping others, K is skeptical:

“People must help each other, that’s what I believe.” K allowed this utterance to sink into his mind. Do I believe in helping people? he wondered. He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand, anything was possible. He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help. (48)

K seems to occupy the space of contingency with respect to others. Like *Bartleby*, he “dwells obstinately in the abyss of potentiality.”¹⁹ He will not speak and commit himself over to an authoritative narrative, just as he will not engage in a political struggle and give himself over to abstract principles. But his radical passivity forces us (those who would narrate) into an exasperated state of uncertainty, and either we dismiss him as childishly apolitical (Robert), or we redouble our efforts to make him speak or, ultimately, to give voice to his silence (the medical officer). In neither case do we respect the potentiality of his silence, the silence of his potentiality, the “responsibility of his response without response” as Derrida writes of *Bartleby*.²⁰ How can we be responsible to this silence? How can we understand K’s position here?

In the first case, we might ask with K, who are “people?” How can they be known “beforehand,” prior to the situation in which they are encountered? This

is an example of what Derrida identifies as the aporia of responsibility,²¹ of ethical action. "Responsibility . . . demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution, and, on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence non-substitution, non-repetition, silence, and secrecy."²² Derrida is referring here to oneself as both substitutable and unique, but this applies all the more to the one to whom one is responsible. "Ethics is . . . the order of and respect for absolute singularity, and not only that of the generality or of the repetition of the same."²³ Ethics must involve principled, which is to say abstract, beliefs and imperatives, but the ethical act can never be merely the application of such principles, for responsibility is responsibility to and for the singular other, not simply with respect to principle or duty, and duty cannot be subjection to a universal law but must be my choice of my law and thus unsubstitutably unique. K is a figuration of silent, unsubstitutable singularity and, like *Bartleby*, demands a realization of the inadequacy of principle in the face of the contingent, unexpected singular.

At this point it will be instructive to look at one interpretation of K's behavior, that of the medical officer in part 2, who famously concludes: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory . . . of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (166).²⁴ The obvious reason the medical officer's narrative is included in the book, in addition to providing some outside account of K (which is not really necessary, since all we get in the novel are outside versions of K: the reaction of soldiers, fellow interns, and so on, as well as that of the seemingly omniscient, but actually distancing narrator),²⁵ is quite specifically in order to provide a quasi-official, white interpretation that is as well-meaning as it is wrong. The medical officer is a "benevolent imperialist," a colonial representative with a bad conscience (another version of the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*):²⁶ a well-intentioned, thoughtful man whose structural position and imperial will to narrate preclude a real understanding of Michael K; and the inclusion of his narrative is extremely important as thematic material included within the overall narrative. Indeed, it both suggests intelligent but incorrect interpretations of K's life, and demands what Gayatri Spivak calls a "counterfocalization" against the narrative perspective of the officer.²⁷

The officer's misprision may help us to understand K's seemingly inscrutable challenge. The first thing to be said about part 2 is that the official record of Michael K is incorrect on almost every count, beginning with his name. The medical officer's superior, Major Noël van Rensburg, refers to the register: "Michaels is an arsonist. He is also an escapee from a labour camp. He was running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local guerrilla population when he was captured. That is the story of Michaels" (131). Noël tries to push the medical officer to release K in the interests of turnaround, but the latter insists K's health will not allow it. Despite this obvious professional and human concern,

and the patent absurdity of the official description of K as an insurgent *Opgaarder* (137), the medical officer's defense is not much better: "Michaels is an idiot . . . [who] doesn't know how to strike a match" (131); he is "otherworldly" (130; 142);²⁸ he fears a vengeful mother (150), and is useless in this world, a "mistake" (155). It is the obvious inadequacy and falsity of this characterization that forces a "counterfocalization" of the narration. Why does the medical officer see things this way, and what is impossible for him to see in K? What can we see?

First, of course, we must consider the ways in which the officer is not wrong. He does recognize the inadequacy of the official story and K's unsuitability to the system, the torn society of civil war (South Africa), but he hardly draws the most insightful conclusions. The officer's attempts at metaphorical capture reveal certain things in this respect. He first thinks of K as a stone (135). This expresses a sense of K as a figure of impervious passivity, and of the earth, but at the cost of dehumanizing him (and therefore de-linking him from human relation—as does the descriptive "otherworldly," although in the stone image he is all too worldly), and without passing any judgment on the society for which he is such a misfit. Later he changes the metaphor to that of a stick insect (149), emphasizing K's physical and dispositional awkwardness and alterity when displaced from his proper habitat. The stick insect's is a very morphology of invisibility, of course, though only within its proper sphere, and the image presumes that the marginal slums of the Cape are where K belongs, harmless (unharmed?) and invisible. This also suggests an understanding of K's relationship to soil and shrubbery, to the earth (rather than the "land" in the Afrikaaner ideology), honing in on K's gardener nature, but by making a silly assessment of K's sense of duty to his mother (150; contrast with 7–8, where she is associated with the soil and an escape from the violence of Cape Town, and thus with a touching duty to return her to the farm in Prince Albert) and, of course, continuing to distance K from a social, human context. Later the medical officer likens K to a holdover from a different age, "like the coelacanth or the last man to speak Yaqui" (151)—but who were K's similars, when was their age? And if K is the last of a linguistic kind, what is his language but that of silence? Finally, as in some early mythology, the medical officer thinks of K as a "handful of dust," a clay man (161), or rather a clay figure, unmanned, an extension of the earth and not created for human intercourse. In every case the officer refuses to place K within a human, social context in which his unsuitability can have critical meaning.

This metaphorical grasping is part of the officer's general will to narrate—which we see even in his dealings with his nurse assistant, Felicity (158)—for the officer, among other things, is another Coetzeean figuration of the writer (as well as of imperial authority). It is well known that one of Coetzee's main predilections is a concern with textuality, especially as it relates to authority.²⁹ Who has the right to speak for whom, and what are the representational, political, and ethical limits of such speaking? From *Dusklands* (1974) through his most recent work,

and especially in *Foe*, this is explicitly thematized.³⁰ I do not want to explore this issue at present, but simply wish to draw attention to the arrogated authority and masked violence that is implicit in this will to narrate K. The convoluted metaphoricity of the episode (from inorganic, to organic, to ethereal-transcendental and back to inorganic dust) is one mark of this will and its frustration. One passage makes clear the thwarting of this desire. The officer and his superior interrogate K but get no answers and grow increasingly angry: "The silence lengthened. Noël did not speak, passing the whole burden to me. 'Come on, Michaels,' I said, 'we haven't got all day, there is a war on!'" (138). Finally K responds: "I am not in the war," causing extreme irritation in his interlocutors. Then, after a few unsatisfying sentences that are extracted with great difficulty and that in no way add up to the desired resistance narrative, K falls silent: "There was a silence so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears, a silence of the kind one experiences in mine shafts, cellars, bomb shelters, airless places" (140). The silence completely exasperates the medical officer and brings an end to the interrogation. But the officer is stuck in anger and frustration and does not begin to think the meaning of this silence.³¹

An influential, negative interpretation of K's silence is offered rather forcefully by Benita Parry: "My hypothesis about Coetzee's figures of silence . . . is that although they are disempowered, and are therefore available to be read as manifesting subordination to, and retreat from, a subjugated condition, the potential critique of political oppression is diverted by the conjuring and endorsing of a non-verbal signifying system," which she describes as "mystic consciousness" or a "transcendent state."³² Ultimately, combined with an abstracting away of the landscape and the particular cultural marks of the specific setting, the gesture "dissipates the engagement with political conditions it also inscribes."³³ So Coetzee is implicated, despite his considerable efforts to the contrary, in an imperious deafness to the eloquence of the speech, as well as the silence, of the South African oppressed. His recourse to figures of ineffability is (again) a political retreat. My suggestion is that despite the complexity of her argument and her presumed attunement to these other voices, Parry herself is quite deaf to K's silence and closed to Coetzee's experiment.³⁴ It is not true that K is represented as transcendent. Half of the examples Parry offers to substantiate her argument are taken from the narrative of the medical officer, but we have no reason to agree with his interpretation. The other examples refer to effects of K's hunger. As far as *Life & Times of Michael K* is concerned, Parry's argument is thus unsubstantiated.³⁵ This leads one to the idea that for Parry the problem is not so much that Coetzee writes a novel about a silent nonwhite character, but that he writes about a nonwhite character at all. Coetzee cannot be silent for "the other" any more than he can speak for "the other." There are obvious problems with this suggestion—its essentialism, its projected aesthetic and ethical prohibition—which can no longer be seriously maintained. If Coetzee is not doomed from

the start in his novelistic project, then we should listen closely to the silence of K, as I attempt to do in this article. I believe Coetzee uses K as a figure of a nontranscendent, disruptive silence in order to stage the complexity of the relationship of ethical responsibility to political action. K will not easily be subsumed within anyone's simple narrative (fool, Opgaarder, mystic, *Bartleby* avatar). He is an aporetic figure that will not be simplified. The medical officer's narrative is included to make this point.

The medical officer does all he can, short of force-feeding K, to keep him alive and to make him talk. But while K is not as silent as the mute Friday in *Foe*, he simply will not allow the officer purchase on his tale, merely turning the questioning around to a query the officer cannot answer: "No one was interested before in what I ate . . . so I ask myself why . . . What is it to this man [the officer] if I live or die?" (148). K's question leads the officer to self-doubt, and extends, in a postmodern, self-reflective way, the lawyer's problematic in "*Bartleby*." The officer echoes K's question in response: "Why me?" (149) in what Attridge identifies in a different context as an example of a bewildered response to the disruptive *arrivant* (*Ethics of Reading* 120–23). The *arrivant* is a term Derrida uses to refer to "the singularity of *who* arrives, he or she who comes, coming to be where s/he was not expected, where one was awaiting him or her without waiting for him or her, without expecting it, without knowing what or whom to expect, what or whom I am waiting for."³⁶ The officer is forced by K's unanticipated apparition into the realization: "I am not ready" (149). This is, of course, precisely the mark of the ethical situation: that for which one is not ready. But he does not know how to help K, how to understand the silent call of this *arrivant*, and instead tries to speak for him, to give him voice in a narrative, thus foreclosing an ethical response by recourse to already known strategies of interaction and discourse. The *arrivant* is related to Agamben's concept of *quodlibet* (*qualunque, quelconque*), any being whatsoever to whom and for whom we are responsible, and forming the basis of a utopian ethical community to come.³⁷ This community is inimical to the state as such, and thus to politics. "The threat the state is not willing to come to terms with is precisely the fact that the unrepresentable should exist and form a community without either presuppositions or conditions of belonging."³⁸ K represents a limit case of the ethical obligation at the basis of this conception of community: the one that cannot be understood, who is precisely dissimilar, unassimilable—in short, *the other*. He demands a realization of obligation in the absence of any marks that place him within a community (the ethnic, the political). As Maurice Blanchot has tellingly written, glossing Levinas (but not, to my mind, sufficiently distancing himself from Levinas's theological assumptions and implications):

Man as *autrui*, always coming from the outside, always without a country in relation to me, a stranger to all possession, dispossessed and without dwelling place, he who is as if "by definition" the proletarian . . . does

not enter into dialogue with me. If I speak to him, I invoke him and speak to him as the one I can neither reach nor place at my disposal; when he speaks to me, he speaks to me by way of the infinite distance he is from me, and his speech announces precisely this infinite, thereby inviting me, through his powerlessness, his destitution, and his strangeness, to a relation that is “incommensurable with a *power* exercised, a conquest, a joyful possession or a knowledge.”³⁹

This passage presents quite a powerful image of the other by keeping it ambivalent, as Coetzee does in *Michael K*, poised between an historically and socioeconomically situated individual, and a parabolic figure of the gap between ethical obligation and epistemological purchase. As incommensurable with a will to knowledge exercised through a particular structure of power, K, as a challenging example of this *autrui*, is obviously completely exasperating to the medical officer, who gradually loses his grip on his social role, as on his narrative, in the face of this enigma.

Increasingly dissatisfied with his professional position, the officer, after K’s “escape,” even imagines following him, forcing him, through speech, to realize that he (the officer) has indeed understood his lesson. He would have become a disciple. But to what? “I am convinced that there are areas that lie between the camps and belong to no camp, not even to the catchment areas of the camps . . . I am looking for such a place in order to settle there” (162). The officer is merely looking for escape. He has interpreted K as a figure of escape or evasion,⁴⁰ of negation: “I was the only one who saw that you were more than you seemed to be . . . Slowly, as your persistent *No*, day after day, gathered weight, I began to feel that you were more than just another patient” (164). For him, K manifests an indefatigable, though passive, will of resistance (163), and he realizes the meaning of the camp, embodied in K, who of course remains outside of the camp, as an escape artist who knows how to find the one safe haven, and turning his back on a war that is not his, can (apolitically) tend his garden (with the attendant Voltairean sense—ironic, of course—of resignation and retreat).

It seems that by placing the officer’s narrative at the heart of the novel, Coetzee is suggesting by its failures that his own “narrative” of Michael K is equally and similarly flawed. By drawing attention to the impossibility of the literary capture of the “other,” compounded by the power relation of the social structure, Coetzee raises the question of the role of literature itself (as well as, if we accept the readings of Michael Marais, Tamlyn Monson, and others, that of ethics as a project of impossible responsibility). While Monson’s Blanchotian answer (102–03) is perhaps plausible—that Coetzee succeeds in his failure (as literature does) rather than failing in his success as Marais, Parry, and others have suggested—we might restate it as yet another example of the need for what Spivak calls “the persistent critique of what we cannot *not* want,” that is, deconstruction.⁴¹ We have to relate

to the other, although we have to recognize the restrictions and difficulties in doing so as a fundamental aporetic condition that could *not* be overcome by the amassing of facts from archives, interviews, and eyewitness accounts. But in being aware of this we have to want to narrate and understand anyhow, and for this, more and mere facts do help, even if we only ever learn much about ourselves and narration itself. So narration is worthwhile that includes within its necessary attempt to describe and assess an ethical, historical, and political situation the awareness of the severe epistemological, ethical, and historical limits on the project of (such) narration. Thus the necessity of the medical officer's narrative *and* the necessity of its inadequacy or failure.

There is some textual evidence outside of the officer's narrative for his conception of K as "escape artist," however unheroic.⁴² At one point K considers, in a thought very far from simple: "Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the time being. How many people are there left who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate? I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too" (182). In the repetition of the word "perhaps," the passage simultaneously disavows, or at least challenges, this interpretation, while it also shows an awareness that in an unjust society no one is free, whatever side of the barbed-wire fence one finds oneself on. In Agamben's terms, in the generalized state of exception of modern politics, "we are all virtually *homines sacri*."⁴³ K, however, is ultimately not a figure of escape. For one thing, none of his escapes is heroic, because in no case is he really hindered. Likewise, in no instance is his escape a triumph of will, of a "persistent *No*." As Agamben says of *Bartleby*, we may say of K: "nothing is further from him than the pathos of negation" ("*Bartleby*" 256).⁴⁴ K exists in a space of priority to any particular will, desire, or motivation. His curious lack of will throughout the book is both an obvious result of his hunger as well as a function of his meaning within the ethical parable.

To understand this helpless lack of will, Agamben again provides a suggestive and insightful figure in his theorizing of infancy. In a brief section of *Idea of Prose* titled "The Idea of Infancy," Agamben discusses the *axolotl* as a symbol of potentiality. This creature, a curious larval form of a salamander that has evolutionarily developed reproductive capacities of its own, thus before its full, "proper," somatic development, is for Agamben a symbol of infancy as such. "Let us try to imagine an infant that, unlike the *axolotl*, does not merely keep its larval environment and retain its own immature form, but is, as it were, so completely abandoned to its own state of infancy, and so little specialized and so totipotent that it rejects any specific destiny and any determined environment in order to hold onto its immaturity and helplessness."⁴⁵ This links back to the discussion in one of his first books, *Infancy and History*, of the capability of experience that we have lost in modernity, but which remains (theoretically) possible

in the language-less potentiality of infancy (from Latin *infantia*, the inability to speak). While aware that an infantilization of Michael K is dangerous—indeed is precisely the (mis)treatment he gets by most of the people he encounters in his journeys—I believe Agamben's very different concept of infancy is quite relevant to the book. And indeed, if we keep in mind Agamben's claim in *Homo Sacer* that “the question ‘In what way does the living being have language?’ corresponds exactly to the question ‘In what way does bare life dwell within the *polis*?’ The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it,” then this issue goes to the heart of Agamben's work, and of Coetzee's concerns in this novel and others, not only those focused on figures of silence, but also his more recent work on minimal ethical obligation in the absence of dignity and grace (*Elizabeth Costello* [2003], *Disgrace* [1999], *Slow Man* [2005], and even the *Diary of a Bad Year* [2007]).⁴⁶ K's refusal of speech, his maintenance of potentiality with respect to a world none of whose options are (yet) desirable, is a refusal of the state of exception that governs his society. Not a determinate critique, not politics per se, but a recusation (and consequent accusation).

Whether there is any intimation in the novel of a *euporic* passage from the aporetic situation embodied by K is uncertain.⁴⁷ And Agamben's elliptical suggestions about the “Coming Community” are among the most frustrating in his work. Of the *quodlibet*, Agamben suggests: “Whatever singularity which . . . rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principal enemy of the State.”⁴⁸ The state and the sovereignty it represents are inimical to this ethical singularity. This at least seems clear throughout Coetzee's novel. Thus, “the novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the state and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.”⁴⁹ Coetzee's novel ends with K escaping the solicitude of “December,” the Cape Town pimp, and his “sisters,” and returning to his mother's old servant's room, where he imagines a return to the country, this time in the role of caregiver to an imagined vagrant who has apparently taken shelter in the abandoned space.⁵⁰ It is not clear what image of community this would represent, except in the transformation of the perceived and reluctant care-receiver to caregiver, flipping the polarity of obligation and thus expanding from singularity to something like community. Agamben's imperfect articulation of a new notion of community in spite or because of the fundamental alterity between any given singular individuals, is nonetheless compelling. The original and uncommitted potentiality represented by K (as by *Bartleby*) is precisely the stage at which we must think ethical community and any subsequent politics (the *arche*, according to Žižek, subtending any political program).

Returning to silence, of the *experimentum linguae* and the community this fundamental experience of language presupposes, Agamben suggests:

The first outcome of the *experimentum linguae*, therefore, is a radical revision of the very idea of Community. The only content of the *experimentum* is that *there is language*, we cannot represent this, by the dominant model in our culture, as *a language*, as a state or a patrimony of names and rules which each people transmit from generation to generation. It is, rather, the unpresupposable non-latency in which men have always dwelt, and in which, speaking, they move and breathe.⁵¹

Like *Bartleby*, by drawing attention to language as such, *K* begs this insight. But this experience of silence, this rediscovery of infancy, with all of its experiential potentiality, is also a removal from the Aristotelian sphere of justice itself.⁵² At question is the very limit of justice at the limit of the human, a topic that is increasingly of interest to Coetzee. Agamben's sovereign-less, post-historical, utopian land (*not* State) of the Good Life hardly seems a clear answer to the problem posed by Coetzee in *Michael K*. But neither does any simple political program of representation, reconciliation, or reform. Herein lies the real political value of Coetzee's novel.

Disruptive *arrivant*, new incarnation of *Bartleby*, *K* is an ethical figure, an embodiment of an ethical problematic. *K* (the ethical) will not be encompassed by (subsumed under) the war (the political), just as he will not be narrated (understood) by the medical officer. As Spivak has written, "It is practically persuasive that the eruption of the ethical interrupts and postpones the epistemological—the undertaking to construct the other as object of knowledge, an undertaking never to be given up."⁵³ Spivak continues by suggesting "that the discontinuities between the ethical and the epistemological and political fields are tamed in the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction."⁵⁴ She goes on to discuss, among other things, *Disgrace*, but it is clear that *Michael K* poses this incompatibility or discontinuity at the same time as it rhetorically "tames" or unites the spheres in a fictionally complex way. *K* is a figure of the ethical that resists the will to knowledge (however writerly) of the colonial representative as it resists subsumption into a properly political struggle (*K* does not join the guerrillas).⁵⁵ As such, as irrecoverable, *K* figures one of Coetzee's most important points: how the ethical must "norm" the political and never simply, beforehand, be prejudged, understood, and added to the calculation.⁵⁶ Indeed *K* is perhaps the most convincing exploration of this problematic in Coetzee's oeuvre, and as such is a valuable example of that "nestling" that characterizes great writing. According to certain aesthetic criteria (underlying negative criticism in the 1980s and '90s), the book is more problematic than productive. But as Agamben suggests, in this respect in agreement with as different a thinker as Spivak, the complex maintenance of a "condition of perpetual potentiality" for thought is the highest vocation of art,⁵⁷ and, incidentally, the only way it can really have political significance.

Through his silence, his maintenance—which is strictly irreducible to will—of potentiality, *K* figures the never-to-be-eliminated ethico-political apo-

ria. As aporia, it gives “no passage,” yet precisely in such a situation we must proceed. “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” In no way does this suggest that the political is impossible or avoidable, just as the failure of narrative (the officer) in no way signifies the futility of narration. Rather, K is a reminder that the undecidable moment of potentiality and decision is never dealt with once and for all, just as a deconstructive-postcolonial insight into the nature of power and language is never understood away into a banality.⁵⁸ Through his staging of K’s eloquent silence, of his obduracy without will, Coetzee, following and extending Melville, teaches us caution and attentiveness in thinking the ethico-political relation, even in a climate where the “right” action or speech seems most obvious.

Bilkent University

Notes

1. Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street,” in *Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford (New York: Library of America, vol. 3, 1984), 635–72. Slavoj Žižek explains: “In his refusal of the Master’s order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a non-predicate; he does not say that he *doesn’t want to do it*; he says that *he prefers (wants) not to do it*. This is how we pass from the politics of ‘resistance’ or ‘protestation,’ which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 381 (emphasis Žižek’s).
2. Giorgio Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” in *Potentialities*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 243–71. On Agamben and radical passivity, see Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), especially chapter 4.
3. Agamben, “Bartleby,” 267.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, trans. Liz Heron (1978; London: Verso, 2007), 9–10. He writes elsewhere: “There can be no true human community on the basis of a presupposition—be it a nation, a language, or even the a priori of communication of which hermeneutics speaks. What unites human beings among themselves is not a nature, a voice, or a common imprisonment in signifying language; it is the vision of language itself, and, therefore, the experience of language’s limits, its *end*.” Agamben, “The Idea of Language,” in *Potentialities*, 47.
5. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 382.
6. J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (New York: Viking, 1984).
7. Nadine Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening,” in *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Sue Kossew (New York: Hall, 1998), 143.
8. For Coetzee’s opinion of Georg Lukács and the continuing viability of his work, see the interview (197–209) with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), especially 202. Earlier in his academic career, however, Coetzee was not above using Lukács as a critical tool; see the essay “Man’s Fate in the Novels of Alex la Guma” (1974), reprinted in *ibid.*, 344–60.

9. Although for an attempt at a reconciliation of Coetzee with that tradition, in this case with the anti-Lukácsian Theodor Adorno, see Neil Lazarus, "Modernism and Modernity: T. W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature," *Cultural Critique* 5 (Winter 1986–1987): 131–55. Also on this topic, see the early assessment (1982) by Michael Vaughan, "Literature and Politics: Currents in South African Writing in the Seventies," in Kossew, *Critical Essays*, 50–65.
10. Dick Penner, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).
11. Parts 1 and 3 of the novel are narrated from a "limited" omniscient, hetero-diegetic, third-person point of view; part 2 is a first-person narrative told, in various formats, from the perspective of an unnamed medical officer.
12. Benita Parry, "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee," in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995*, ed. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 149–65.
13. Most notably Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), which further undermines the authority of narration and presents/obfuscates the actually mute character of Friday, and *Age of Iron* (1990), which complicates the relationship between the benevolent white narrator and the reluctant, taciturn, obscure nonwhite *arrivant*.
14. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (2003; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 87–98. As the medical officer expresses it in part 2: "Michaels . . . approached, I thought, as near to a state of life in death or death in life, whatever it was, as is humanly possible" (*Michael K* 159). He is the emblem, as *homo sacer*, of the generalized state of exception that marks the broken, violent society of camps, surveillance, and repression. This Agambenian point suggests that K should be taken as a fundamental parabolic figure of his society and its constitutive power relations as much as a specific case of a disempowered and disenfranchised individual in the specific political conjecture of late apartheid. See also *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (1995; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), especially 119–35 and 166–80. For a critique of Agamben's ahistorical use of the "state of exception," see Andreas Kalyvas, "The Sovereign Weaver: Beyond the Camp," in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death*, ed. Andrew Norris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 107–34.
15. See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz (Homo Sacer III): The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (1998; New York: Zone, 1999), chapter 2. For a critique of Agamben's use of the *Muselmann*, including in relation to language, see J. M. Bernstein, "Intact and Fragmented Bodies: Versions of Ethics 'after Auschwitz,'" *New German Critique* 97, 31:1 (2006): 31–52.
16. Later, to the soldier guarding the entrance to the camp, K does come up with a disarming and *simple* response: "I don't want to be in a camp, that's all" (85). Curiously, the man who speaks to K at this point is later (79) revealed to be the very Robert who represents political consciousness in the novel. This perhaps makes his initial statements to K ironic.
17. For a summary of this criticism, see Kossew, "Introduction," 3. Subsequent recuperations of the text insist on its political pertinence, but displaced in a postcolonial, postmodern, poststructuralist version of a Frankfurt School (or *Tel Quel*) emphasis on

the indirect political force of language and artistic form. Indeed, following Adorno against Lukács, it can be said that an artwork can be politically important or effective only on the level of form and never explicitly and solely as a matter of ostensibly political content. Since its initial reception, almost all critics of the novel have argued a version of this account with respect to the political in one form or another. I do not disagree here so much as focus on the aporetic relationship of the political to the ethical that is staged in the novel.

18. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 207–08.
19. Agamben, “Bartleby,” 254.
20. Jacques Derrida, *Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 75.
21. “The concept of responsibility . . . [is] paralyzed by what can be called an aporia . . . That has never stopped it from ‘functioning,’ as one says. On the contrary, it operates so much better, to the extent that it serves to obscure the abyss or fill in its absence of foundation, stabilizing a chaotic process of change in what are called conventions.” Ibid., 84.
22. Ibid., 61. See also Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” *Cardozo Law Review* 11, no. 5–6 (1990): 920–1045, especially the first aporia, that of *épokhè* and rule (961–67).
23. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 84.
24. Incidentally, this comment is taken by most critics of the book as an invitation to connect Coetzee with a deconstructionist project ascribed to Derrida. Attwell, for example, writes, “One might speak of K as the narratological figure of the Derridean trace.” *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 99. Dominic Head, while drawing attention to the questionability of the officer’s interpretation (*J. M. Coetzee* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 106–07), nonetheless, like Attwell and others, assumes that some insight about K is captured in this formulation. What seems misguided in this line of interpretation is not so much the linking with Derrida as the conclusion drawn that this is a postmodernist moment of the self-deconstruction of the authority of narrative, of language—or, rather, that it is primarily such a moment. While Coetzee is often interested in similar problems, I think a different insight is at work here, for surely Coetzee’s point in *Michael K* isn’t that there is no certain meaning ascribable to this society, or that its meaning is a blind spot inaccessible within and supplementary to the system. Rather, the meaning is all too obvious: this is an unjust society; everyone in it is forced to live a wrong life. K happens to be a persistent reminder of an all-too-apparent truth.
25. On narrative distance in the novel, see Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 50–52.
26. As Attwell asserts of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Coetzee, through the narrative strategy in *Michael K*, “does not presume to speak from a position outside of the colonial episteme” (93). On the Magistrate as “benevolent imperialist,” see Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 20–23. Also see Stephen Watson’s discussion in “Colonialism in the Novels of J. M. Coetzee,” in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), 13–36.

27. Gayatri Spivak, "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching," *Diacritics* 32, no. 3–4 (2002): 22.
28. Contra Parry (see 154), it is the medical officer, not Coetzee, who offers this version of K in a thoroughly questionable interpretation.
29. Generalizing from the medical officer's narrative, Michael Marais suggests in "Literature and the Labour of Negation: J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*" (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36, no. 1 [2001]): 107–25, that "Coetzee represents writing as a space in which the subject loses control over the other" (116), and that from this we can understand Coetzee to argue "that the relation which writing establishes with otherness invests literature with the ability to disturb the self-consolidating relation that is at the base of sociality" (119).
30. For an interesting discussion of *Foe* in this context, see Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 169–97, as well as Lewis MacLeod, "'Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?' or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*" (*Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 1, [2006]): 1–18.
31. For a different but reasonable take on this silence that focuses more on its straightforward political meaning, see Michael Marais, "The Hermeneutics of Empire: Coetzee's Post-Colonial Metafiction," in Huggan and Watson, ed., *Critical Perspectives*, 66–81.
32. Parry, "Silence," 53, 153, 158.
33. *Ibid.*, 164; see also 160–61.
34. A strong initial criticism of Parry's polemic can be found in the fifth chapter of Sue Kossew, *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), although she does not draw out the theoretical implications I find most compelling in the novel.
35. *Foe*, though more complicated, is also misinterpreted, again by a mix of mistake (121) and misreading of the narrative texture, in this instance of according straightforward meaning to the suggestions of the author Foe, to say nothing of the final section's dream narration.
36. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 33.
37. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (1990; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1–2. This thinking of the "coming community" through the idea of *quodlibet* is also related to Derrida's problematic of conditional and unconditional hospitality. See Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). On critical differences in the messianic communities envisioned by the two philosophers, see Catherine Mills, "Agamben's Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment, and Happy Life" (*Contretemps* 5 [December 2004]), 42–62. For problems with Agamben's vague conception of the coming community, see Kalyvas, 114–17.
38. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (1996; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 89.
39. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (1969; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 56.
40. Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 92–93.

41. Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 42.
42. Also see Coetzee in *Doubling the Point*: "If one takes Michael K seriously as a hero, a paragon, a model, it can only be as a hero of resistance against—or rather withdrawal from or evasion of—accepted ideas of the heroic" (206).
43. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 115.
44. Agamben, "Bartleby," 256; see Marais, "Negation," on K's resistance to any Hegelian economy of negation.
45. Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (1985; New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 96.
46. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.
47. Giorgio Agamben, "Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality," in *Potentialities*, 217. Literally, *euphoria* means "easy to pass through," and Agamben refers in the article to a Platonic "solution" (merely apparent) to problems of self-reference by recourse to a concept of potentiality, though by extension we refer here to a sort of ethical "way out" similar to that which Agamben is discussing with reference to a productive potentiality of deconstruction in Derrida.
48. Agamben, *Coming Community*, 87.
49. *Ibid.*, 85.
50. This will be taken up in the 1990 *Age of Iron*, although with a very different kind of narrator.
51. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 10.
52. "Man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals . . . the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust." *Politics* I.ii. 9–15, trans. B. Jowett, in Jonathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).
53. Spivak, "Ethics and Politics," 17.
54. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
55. What Gilles Deleuze ("Bartleby; or The Formula," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997]) says of Bartleby has resonance here: "If Bartleby had refused, he could still be seen as a rebel or insurrectionary, and as such would still have a social role. But the formula stymies all speech acts, and at the same time, it makes Bartleby a pure outsider to whom no social position can be attributed" (73).
56. This problem is put to work in much of Coetzee's fiction, but also see *Doubling the Point* (338): "I think you will find the contest of interpretations I have sketched here—the political versus the ethical—played out again and again in my novels." Also, "The last thing I want to do is to *defiantly* embrace the ethical as against the political. I don't want to contribute, in that way, toward marking the ethical as the pole with the lack" (200). Instead he seeks to keep the two in the aporetic relation and work through, in his fictions, the consequences and nuances of this irreducibility.
57. Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (1970; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 65.
58. See Spivak, *Critique*, 191.